The chimera of sustainable labour-management partnership

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Abstract

The article advances a threefold theoretical contribution using a System, Society and Dominance (SSD) effects framework to show how and why sustainable management-labour workplace partnerships are a chimera. First, managers (employers) find it increasingly difficult to keep workplace bargains with employees (unions) due to increasingly neo-liberal 'system' effects associated with capitalism as a globalized accumulation model. Second, workplace mutuality will be rare because of 'society' level effects under voluntarism. Third, 'dominance' effects arising from the power of dominant economies and their multinational corporations can inhibit workplace mutuality. Drawing on empirical case study data from Ireland, the future prognosis of management-labour collaboration under neo-liberal work regimes is discussed.

Keywords:

Management-labour partnership, mutuality, neo-liberalism, voluntarism

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1. Introduction

With the decline in collective bargaining and union density in most ‘English-speaking’ liberal market economies (LMEs), the concepts of mutuality and cooperative labour-management partnership at the workplace have attracted attention from management scholars, practitioners and policy-makers for some time (Gunnigle, 1998; Guest and Peccei, 2001; Kochan *et al.*, 2008; Brewster *et al.*, 2014; Danford *et al.*, 2014; Johnstone, 2014). The concept of mutuality describes the desired outcome of the practices management use to engage workers, both directly as individuals and indirectly through employee representatives, to create shared benefits for both parties (Cullinane *et al.*, 2014). The specific mechanisms commonly associated with workplace partnership are highly variable, but generally include indirect cooperation between management and employee representatives; parallel direct employee involvement via teamwork and other voice mechanisms; and bundles of complementary Human Resource Management (HRM) practices, notably financial participation, employment security and training (Kochan *et al.*, 2008; Johnstone and Ackers, 2014; Wilkinson *et al.*, 2014).

A rationale to evaluate collaborative labour-management partnership has been advanced by Budd (2004), including, specifically, processes that can help mediate ‘efficiency, equity and voice’ in the employment relationship on an enduring basis (Johnstone *et al.*, 2010). While the priorities of employers are invariably efficiency related, this needs to be balanced with equity (employment standards and fair treatment) and meaningful worker voice (employees have an input into decisions affecting them). In view of this, partnership arrangements involving trade unions are commonly seen as more robust and facilitative of a wider pluralist understanding of mutuality than might be encountered in non-union work regimes;

for instance, because institutional power-sharing and independence from management is more likely (Cullinane *et al*., 2014).

Employee participation arrangements in economies like Ireland, the UK, Australia and the United States (US) are subject to particular liberal market pressures that underscore the significance of forces affecting actor choice (Marchington, 2015). Crucially, in the context of voluntarist industrial relations, employer choice remains the primary source of authority to initiate workplace partnership. Therefore, ideas surrounding ‘mutuality’, ‘labour management partnership’, and ‘voluntarism’, are not static entities but part of an unfolding dynamic shaped as much by the relative power of parties and contextual forces (Rittau and Dundon, 2010; Marchington, 2015). With the global economic downturn of recent years affecting many economies, the theme of mutuality is often recast, with a focus on relative distribution of pain rather than equalising of cooperative gain (Kaufman, 2014). This article contributes to both the theory and practice of mutuality under contemporary neo-liberal modes of capitalist accumulation (McDonough and Dundon, 2010; McDonough *et al.*, 2010; Thompson, 2013). In so doing it responds to calls to move ‘beyond’ an enterprise focus on HRM (Delbridge *et al.*, 2011). It also moves beyond now stagnant debates concerning winners versus losers of partnership. The article further engages with related debates in this journal on how environmental contextual forces impact upon organizational strategies, firm capabilities and workplace relationship dynamics (see for instance Conway *et al.,* 2014; Witcher and Chau, 2012; Wood and Budhwar, 2014).

Reflecting on case study evidence, the analysis shows how the interplay of various forces serve to undermine workplace-level collaboration. In short, sustained partnership is a chimera: that is an illusion and figment of aspirational theoretical imagination. Indeed, even within robust integrative arrangements that involve well-established trade unions, strategies for mutuality faltered. The contribution advances that sustained labour-management collaboration is largely a delusion, because of three interrelated conditions. First, managers have difficulty supporting workplace deals with employees due to external global neo-liberal economic pressures. Second, under State-sponsored voluntarist policies, cooperative mutuality will be rare given absence of regulations to engender support for innovative and inclusive workplace practices. Finally, the power of dominant economies and their multinational corporations often overshadows local managerial initiative for strategic choice. The article's contribution provides insights relevant to other neo-liberal contexts - such as the UK, USA or Australia - where durability of voluntarist mutuality remains a key academic and public policy concern (Boxall, 2013; Wilkinson *et al.*, 2014; Marchington, 2015).

The article is structured as follows. Next we review literature and build theory related to the *System, Society and Dominance* (SSD) effects framework, and associated conditions affecting the potential longevity of workplace collaboration, to advance three propositions: i) *System* effects associated with stages of globalized capitalist accumulation will mean there is high probability that managers, even when they want to, will find it difficult to honour workplace bargains owing to external forces; ii) *Society* effects associated with the national role of the State regarding voluntarist regulation and weak institutional constraints will inhibit the capacity of management-employee mutuality to grow and endure in practice; and iii), *Dominance* effects stemming from the powerful role of dominant economies and their multinational corporations, in particular American MNCs, will encourage managers to choose alternative individualistic HRM rather than collective (partnership) forms of labour-management collaboration. Section 3 explains the research setting to examine these propositions along with the methodological rationale. Section 4 assesses the importance of environmental and context forces (macro and micro) shaping the durability of collaborative mutuality in the case study firms. Finally, the discussion considers the future prognosis for workplace cooperation under modes of neo-liberal capitalist accumulation.

2. System, Society and Dominance (SSD) effects on workplace mutuality

It is important for management scholars to unpick how comparative contextual conditions across multiple levels promote and prevent organisational strategies for cooperative dialogue (Whitcher and Chau, 2012; Wood *et al.,* 2014; Marchington, 2015). In this section we review existing literature exploring the broader conditions affecting longevity of collaborative mutuality.

SSD theory is deployed as an overarching framework (Smith and Meiksins, 1995), using the Republic of Ireland as a contextual example, to analyse the propositions. The SSD framework allows a multi-level analysis of how workplace partnership can be shaped but not determined by three interacting pressures: i) the dynamic structure of capitalism as a global economic accumulation *system;* ii) mediating national-level State institutions exert a *society* effect on workplace actions; and iii), the *dominance* effect of powerful economies and multinational corporations (Smith and Meiksins, 1995; Delbridge *et al.,* 2011; Edwards *et al.,* 2013).

i) System effects: fragility of workplace bargains under disconnected capitalism

The first part of the framework concerns analysis of the stages of globalized capitalist accumulation (McDonough *et al.,* 2010) and attendant systemic effects on the (in)stability of long-term management-labour relations. Capitalism as an economic system sets various contradictory ‘parameters and constraints on organisational choice’, but does not directly determine such choices (Smith and Meiksins, 1995:253). These systemic pressures have been reinforced by an apparently increasing hegemonic ideology of neo-liberalism, marketization and financialization (Thompson, 2013; Hauptmeier and Vidal, 2014).

With regard to Ireland, for example, the consequence of its exposure to global market forces and its high dependence on multinational capital is that employers can easily renege on workplace bargains struck with employees. This echoes Thompson’s (2013) view that there are powerful tensions inherent in capitalism which exacerbate disunity between institutions, corporate governance arrangements, actors and employment regulations, thereby unravelling cohesiveness. Given these acute structural tensions, Thompson (2013) observes that actors within liberal market regimes find it increasingly difficult to make connections between collaborative objectives in the spheres of work and employment. Consequently, managers find it much harder to keep their side of not only the explicit transactional (negotiated) deal, but also the implicit (psychological) side of the work-effort exchange (Cullinane and Dundon, 2006). The instabilities generated by what Thompson (2013) terms ‘disconnected capitalism’ are evident in the Irish context, where the institutional configuration of national collaboration (e.g. social partnership) and voluntarist workplace mutuality confronted the excesses of a global neo-liberal economic paradigm. Tensions between minimal workplace regulation and managerial prerogative suggest that there is a high probability managers may renege on bargains generated with employees even under work regimes designed for collaborative mutuality. To this end Proposition 1 is formulated thus:

Proposition 1: There is a high risk probability that managers (employers) will find it increasingly difficult to keep workplace bargains with employees (unions) under an increasingly disconnected capitalist system.

ii) Society effects: voluntarism and weak regulatory constraints

Capitalism has systemic generalizable properties and pressures for accumulation, but they are embedded within and mediated by institutional variation and different national political economies (Smith and Meiksins, 1995; Delbridge *et al.*, 2011; Hauptmeier and Vidal, 2014). Therefore, rather than universal patterns arising from capitalist accumulation pressures, 'societal effects' on capital-labour relations at firm level will vary across countries; depending, for example, on variation in institutional pathways and competitive postures in different countries. The role of the State is crucial here.

Societal effects on workplace partnerships in Ireland, for example, are shaped by a preference for voluntarism rather than statutory regulation regarding governance of workplace and economic issues (Dobbins, 2010). Ireland developed a national-level consensus-oriented bargaining arrangement between 1987-2009, whereby the social partner's negotiated pay, tax rates and other economic and social issues through successive national agreements. Social partnership subsequently collapsed in late 2009 after the then government imposed austerity measures in response to a failed banking system (McDonough and Dundon, 2010; Roche, 2013). The institutional linkage between national partnership and workplace mutuality was formulated through public policies designed to diffuse enterprise collaboration on a voluntary basis. National framework agreements avoided prescribing the scope of partnership or the range of issues that could be addressed at the workplace. A tripartite National Centre for Partnership and Performance (NCPP) was specifically introduced with a remit to diffuse partnerships at workplace level; however, the

NCPP was disbanded in 2010 amidst public sector reforms. The reality is that despite experimentation with collaborative practices, empirical evidence points out that the diffusion of workplace partnership was and remains limited (Roche and Teague, 2014).

Collaborative mutuality through partnership may be rare but can develop where there is support from senior management; when competitive postures are oriented towards innovation, knowledge, and skilled workers; there exists advanced capital-intensive technology; and where employers introduce complementary ‘bundles’ of cooperative work practices that fit value-added competitive postures based on quality competition (Murray *et al.*, 2002; Belanger and Edwards, 2007; Dobbins and Gunnigle, 2009). Therefore, voluntary collaborative regimes are feasible; albeit in very specific circumstances. What is more common, as Godard (2004) suggests, is unilateral management prerogative or weak employee involvement given the emphasis on cost-minimization and labour-intensive competition. In such contexts, robust workplace partnership will only be adopted by employers when seen as economically advantageous.

Institutional complementarity is an important factor affecting mutual collaboration: institutions are complementary if the presence of one institution enhances efficiency of others (Streeck, 1997; Hancke *et al.,* 2007). Yet, even prior to the collapse of national level partnership, Ireland lacked what Hancke *et al.,* (2007:5) note is the all important architecture of ‘institutional comparative advantage’. By this is meant an institutional complementarity across societal levels. Importantly, such complementarity determines the degree to which an economy is coordinated in pursuit of a redistribution of wealth, power, risk and competitiveness. Long before its sudden economic recession, Ireland gravitated towards a promiscuous neo-liberal regime more akin to the US free market system than the coordinated equity and voice orientation of the European social democratic tradition (Roche, 2007). A consequence is that while the Irish model displayed elements of cooperative collaboration during the 'social partnership era', the pervasiveness of laissez-faire capitalism resulted in an imbalance of benefits distributed to capital at the expense of labour.

Streeck (1997) takes the idea of institutional complementarity further by introducing the concept of 'beneficial constraints', relevant at a broader societal level. According to Streeck (1997: 197), contrary to arguments that economic performance improves when labour market regulations are removed, 'socially institutionalized constraints on the rational voluntarism of interest maximizing behaviour may be economically beneficial'. The notion is that beneficial constraints, like statutory provision for works councils or co-determination in States like Germany, can improve economic performance when society intervenes in market activity to limit the unfettered pursuit of profit-maximisation. Streeck (2004: 426) explains how 'institutions clearly not created with economic efficiency in mind, may turn out to be sources of superior economic performance and competitiveness'. In contrast, voluntarist collaboration sponsored by employers is impeded by contradictory pressures pushing management towards cost-cutting and unilateral actions. Even the most temporary alteration from cooperative relations can be counterproductive as employees question management credibility: 'the mere possibility of defection, as is by definition inherent in any voluntary arrangement, can damage the positive effects of workplace cooperation' (Streeck, 1997: 201).

Accordingly, scholars have suggested that in societies that display enduring voluntary institutional path dependency, management-labour collaborations are feasible but rare

(Belanger and Edwards, 2007; McLaughlin, 2013). Arguably, stronger beneficial constraints in the form of proactive State regulation may be a necessary condition for sustainable cooperation to be diffused more widely to workplace levels. Therefore, in the absence of harder regulatory ‘beneficial constraints’, exemplars of robust and enduring enterprise collaboration will tend to be small and isolated islands in liberal economies (McLaughlin, 2013). From the above discussion, the following proposition has been formulated:

> *Proposition 2: Workplace mutuality will be rare because of the societal institutional effects of voluntarism and minimal regulation on employer actions.*

iii) Dominance effects: powerful economies and multinational corporations

Dominance effects relate to the power resources possessed by dominant economies and multinational corporations in shaping institutions and workplace practice in other nation states (Smith and Meiksins, 1995; Edwards *et al.,* 2013). Delbridge *et al.* (2011:499) comment how workplace social relations in local subsidiaries of multinationals may be shaped by the parent company via corporate influence. Since the 1960s, institutions and workplace practices in Ireland have been heavily shaped by the dominance effects of the United States and reliance on foreign direct investment (FDI) from multinational corporations. This has impacted upon the limited diffusion of, in particular, labour management partnerships, because US multinationals have exported what are widely seen as exemplars of individualist HRM policies which, together, militate against collectivist work regimes (Gunnigle, 1995; Scullion *et al.,* 2007).

Therefore, for the past fifty years, successive Irish governments of all political persuasions have prioritized a policy of economic liberalisation. The centrepiece of Irish political economy, seemingly driving other policy areas, is the overriding concern to attract and retain foreign direct investment from multinational corporations, from the US above all (Collings *et al.,* 2008). Evidently, American multinational corporations exert substantial power over public policy, to the extent that successive Irish governments have avoided placing many constraints on the decision-making prerogative of big business. The role of the US as a dominant economy and the power of multinational corporations (American and others) has interacted with system and society effects, throwing up various tensions in industrial relations (Gunnigle, 1995). The effect of attracting multinational capital into a complementary neo-liberal market regime was underpinned by State sponsorship via low corporation tax and minimal employment regulation (McDonough and Dundon, 2010). The extent to which multinational capital utilises Ireland as a channel for global tax avoidance and tax minimisation agreements is now widely known, with exclusive arrangements made with American corporations by the Irish government (Stewart, 2013; Houlder *et al.,* 2014).

Given these dominance effects, statutory supports for workplace partnership were not pursued due to fear of frightening away US multinationals, who tend to object to any form of collectivist labour market regulation. For this reason, social partnership in Ireland was rooted in the continuation of a voluntarist tradition with minimal statutory employment rights. One stark contradiction arising from this was the inclusion of trade unions in macro-economic governance through national partnership, yet the simultaneous refusal to legislate for statutory trade union recognition rights for collective bargaining at the workplace (Dundon and Collings, 2011). Employment rights that do exist at workplace level were often begrudgingly legislated for only in response to mandatory European Directives, and then usually transposed in a ‘light touch’ manner. Notable in this regard is that the Irish government colluded with representatives of multinational capital to ensure a minimalist national transposition of the EU Information & Consultation of Employees (ICE) Directive, which limited the diffusion of workplace mutuality (Dundon *et al*., 2014). Proposition 3 has been developed from the above discussion of Dominance effects:

> *Proposition 3: Dominance effects associated with the power of dominant economies and multinational corporations further restricts workplace mutuality.*

3. Research Methods and Case Study Organizations

A multiple case study methodology was used to capture the diversity of workplace practices, occupational coverage, market variation and sector difference in Ireland. The research design collected and analysed data on a range of employee-union-management cooperative behaviours, including questions related to the perceived strength and durability of mutuality over time. Data collection and analysis was organized around the three propositions, notably the interplay between external (macro) and internal (micro) factors affecting strength and durability of workplace partnership arrangements. The format of the questions was tailored by whether the respondents were managers, union representatives or workers. For example, senior managers were asked if there were any tensions or pressures affecting the strength of partnership in terms of its capacity to deal with contentious issues and reconcile divergent interests. Likewise, workers and union stewards were asked questions about the usefulness of partnership forums for advancing employee and union concerns. The aim was to ‘bring to life’ real world incidents supporting and/or inhibiting mutuality. Six case studies were included in the final selection based on prior public knowledge about their collaborative practices. All six case study organisations had also been publically endorsed as leading exemplars of best practice partnership in Ireland by the then government agency responsible for the promotion of mutual gains collaboration, the NCPP. As such, the six cases represented, at least at face value, evidence of strong and effective labour-management collaboration. All six were also unionised, which offered the potential to subject both union and employer practice concerning collaboration to critical scrutiny.

The case organizations

Four of the six cases are manufacturing and two service sector companies. A condition of research access was that the companies remain anonymous and all have been given pseudonyms. *Manufacturing A* is a continuous process single product plant that commenced trading in 1983. It employs 435 people and 70% of the total workforce is unionized (all process operatives are union members). *Manufacturing B* employs 1600 people and has 100% union density. *Manufacturing C* employs 85 people and is also 100% unionized. *Manufacturing D* was a highly unionized indigenous company which employed 1700 people when the research began, although employment levels shrank dramatically and the company went into receivership amidst global economic crisis. Of the two services sector cases, *Hospitality E* employs 480 staff and is 75% unionized, while *Finance F* employs 600 staff with 94% of the workforce unionized. Each case is a plant of a private sector multinational organisation.

Data collection and analysis

The research provided access at all levels in the case organizations, including middle and senior managers, union representatives, and employees. The research also incorporated a longitudinal element with case organisations visited over a three year period, between 2007 and 2009, prior to the collapse of national partnership in Ireland. In addition to semi-structured interviews during the primary research stage, an element of ethnographic nonparticipant observation was possible, which further reinforced interview findings. Extensive documentary material was also utilised, such as personnel or relevant HR policies. A total of 126 individuals were interviewed: 42 managers from all levels; 34 union representatives, including shop stewards, partnership facilitators and union officials; and 50 employees (which included several focus groups with an average of 8 employees per group).

Data analysis followed a structured thematic approach in relation to the SSD framework and how macro-level forces shaped micro-level outcomes. For example, themes relating to ‘system’ effects were explored when asking respondents questions about possible changes to collaborative workplace cooperation arising from say market or economic conditions. Likewise, possible ‘societal’ effect linkages were drawn when asking questions about the perceived utility with voluntary forms of participation and employee voice regulation in the case organisations, and from among different respondent types. Further thematic data analysis was made in relation to potential ‘dominance’ effects when asking respondents about the influence of ‘individualist’ (Americanized) HRM policies, as well as questions concerning multinational corporate head office strategy. The thematic structure also allowed for analysis of pertinent micro level configurational factors (unionisation, employer perceptions of risk, role of partnership champions, business strategy, market pressures, use of advanced technologies, among other potential micro influences).

Finally, a stage to ensure validity of the data and its analysis was employed. For example, coding was applied to emergent thematic issues described above. These were checked and re-checked by both researchers. In addition, a follow-up stage was adopted for verification purposes using secondary sources and telephone conversations/email correspondence with respondents, to check issues and developments since the initial primary research stages.

4. Findings

The case study data is presented in relation to the SSD framework effects. These show how a complex interplay of contextual external (macro) and internal (micro) environmental forces mediate workplace partnership across the six organizations.

Macro-level environmental forces

System effects and the fragility of workplace bargains: Our case evidence illustrates how the fragility of collaborative enterprise bargains constrains mutuality and in some cases results in the actual collapse of partnership; often linked to acute vulnerability to systemic global market forces. For example, longer-term cooperation at Manufacturing B, C and D ceased in the face of management responses to competitive pressures. Unions at these three plants, meanwhile, faced concession bargaining with pay freezes and cost-cutting which entailed redundancies and reduced pension benefits. The partnership forum collapsed at Manufacturing C due to a very difficult economic climate and a subsequent slump in profits, which led to compulsory redundancies. In Manufacturing D, meanwhile, a partnership committee designed to embed mutual collaboration collapsed due to acute global market pressures. A deterioration in the company's competitiveness culminated in substantial job losses, cost-cutting, pay freezes and outsourcing. Cooperation was not sufficiently institutionalized to survive 'pivotal events' relating to economic crisis and senior management turnover. In short, the conditions supporting cooperation at Manufacturing D were too weak to counteract the pressures undermining it, even in what was formerly regarded as a robust collaborative regime. Above all, the data illustrates the difficulty of sustaining cooperation in the face of environmental turbulence coupled with liberalized regulation. Manufacturing D went into receivership in 2009 and subsequently re-opened on a much smaller-scale in 2010 under the ownership of American venture capitalist investors. Workers were not blind to system effect uncertainty:

> *"Trust is not great. You would wonder are they going to close the place altogether. They can make the product cheaper elsewhere. None of us know what the top management are planning at the end of the day"* (employee operator, Manufacturing D).

Societal effects and voluntary regulation: The voluntarist nature of regulation was evidently linked to government policies which allowed employers to decide whether to engage in labour-management partnership practices or not, and if so, under what arrangements. The State explicitly preferred voluntarist framework agreements with a 'soft' supportive institutional environment (e.g. the NCPP) rather than legally mandated worker participation rights. In short, the State socially engineered a societal culture founded on voluntary regulation and minimal legislation not only for its industrial relations regime, but also broader macroeconomic and social welfare changes.

Societal effects permeated workplace actions. In all our cases, management made the major decisions about whether to create or sustain collaborative structures and processes. Workplace cooperation was often dependent on management goodwill to ensure that practices flourished. In Manufacturing C and Hospitality E, for example, management dominated the agenda and scope of issues subject to collaborative engagement with workers (unions). In Financial Services F, the union was excluded from a contractual change under the transfer of undertakings regulations when some staff moved to another employer. When management decided to sell one part of the business, the decision was announced without involving employees or their union. This single event exposed the inability of the union to counter the power of management to make unilateral decisions in response to market conditions. At Manufacturing B, union representatives viewed the partnership forum as being invited in as a "guest" of management, and that partnership took place on the employers' terms. Employee respondents commented that they felt there was insufficient consultation about various issues, that their concerns were not being adequately addressed, and that management appeared to 'pay lip service' to consultation fora. A senior union representative remarked:

> *"where workers' …. concerns are not given due weight, disenchantment begins to creep in. It does illustrate that real partnership has to be a partnership of equals".*

Apart from the minor quibbles many managers often raise about regulations, red tape, or European Directives, there was little compulsion to share power with other workplace stakeholders over the longer-term. Collaborative mutuality was subject to minimal statutory regulation and management could opt to exit such arrangements quite easily. The State preferred not to prescribe what partnership should look like in practice, and the emphasis was on encouraging voluntarist mutuality though the auspices of national framework agreements. Consequently, even at the cases that evidenced robust cooperation (e.g. Manufacturing A and Finance F), union representatives called for consultation to be given a stronger footing through more formal structures. In the Financial Services case study, institutional support for union recognition was something union officials would prefer, linking the idea to comparable health and safety rights, rather than premised on the goodwill of managerial prerogative.

Dominance effects:

In conjunction with both System and Societal effects above, the case organizations were influenced by Dominance effects. Of paramount significance in this regard was the power of dominant economies, multinational organisations and host country (or HQ) influences, to shape workplace practice. All the multinational organizations – both of US and non-US origin - had introduced what can be described as idealised 'best practice' individualist HRM policies in their Irish operations which, in some cases, encroached and undermined relations with unions. Dominance effects were in part transmitted through staunch opposition, especially by US multinationals, to forms of collective or 'hard' labour market regulation; notably, opposition to statutory trade union recognition legislation and mandatory works council legislation. The broader ramification of these Dominance effects is an espoused reluctance for mandated workplace mutuality, such as statutory partnership or work councils. Even in the strongest or most robust case, Manufacturing A, unions wanted to see more institutional support for their voice and were somewhat wary about employer endorsement of individual HRM type practices that tended to undermine collective bargaining and workforce solidarity.

Micro-level context factors

In our cases, micro-level factors tended to be insufficient to protect and sustain partnerships in the face of the macro level factors above. The balance tended to be skewed towards management's search for efficiency, and less on equity and independent employee voice. Manufacturing A was a rare example of robust and enduring partnership, with supportive props at micro level in the face of what seem like apparently countervailing SSD effects, as reported above.

Value-added quality competition and advanced technology are important factors for incubating collaborative mutuality. For example, continuous process technology at Manufacturing A presented favourable conditions for problem-solving employee forums, semi-autonomous teamwork and gainsharing, that were championed through a partnership committee. This in turn enhanced the durability of cooperation, and management were also less likely to relocate such an expensive capital-intensive plant. An electrician illustrated this point at Manufacturing A: "*the good thing about this place is they cannot move it*".

Balance of risk and power (dis)equilibrium: Another important micro factor affecting durability of collaboration is whether the respective parties can take the appropriate risks and reach the necessary power equilibriums necessary for arrangements to endure in the longer-term. The (temporary) breakdown of collaboration at Manufacturing B due to worker (union) disenchantment illustrates the difficulty of sustaining power compromises. In this case cooperative dialogue and mutual problem-solving was abandoned because it could not resolve the more distributive as opposed to integrative bargaining issues; in particular disagreement about pension reform. Subsequent to the pension issue the parties tended to disagree about what was a collaborative type of issue and what was a more conflictual bargaining matter. In the end the preserve of managerial prerogative dominated as some decisions were unilaterally imposed. The resultant power dis-equilibrium led to the (temporary) breakdown of collaboration, and conflicts of interest were referred to external third party mediation (the Labour Relations Commission). Workplace cooperation was subsequently recalibrated at Manufacturing B when a new Information and Consultation Forum was introduced – partly in response to the transposed Information and Consultation of Employees Act 2006. In Finance F also, it was reported by union stewards that supervisors would hold back information until it was perceived to be too late for the union or employees to object to proposed changes to working practice. One union representative remarked:

> “*individuals* [line managers] *are not comfortable sharing information ... they wait until it’s* [new change initiative] *almost ready to happen before they share it*”

Agency and unionisation: The presence and strength of workplace trade unionism (evidenced by high union density and independence from management) was a significant factor in all six cases. Indeed, the cases were selected because they were publicly known to advocate partnership, were heralded as exemplars of union-management cooperation, and had been endorsed by the State agency responsible for promoting workplace level partnerships at the time, the NCPP. Importantly, the union role was often qualified by managers in terms of what value it could add to the company. A senior manager at Manufacturing A explained:

> *“We saw that the adversarial way couldn’t continue. Unions represent 70 per cent of the workforce, so there is no way the plant could thrive under adversarialism. So it was seen that the way forward was in partnership”.*

In addition, while most trade union actors were receptive to new industrial relations approaches incorporating integrative problem-solving, they also realised that management remained the dominant agent. Even under robust collaborative regimes, the union role could be undermined, with union representatives explaining that they were not involved in some decisions or that the nature of managerial change was too contentious for the union to support. One example was the pension reform in Manufacturing B, noted above, which led to the temporary collapse of the union-management dialogue forum. In other cases, a similar dynamic resulted in members feeling detached from their union when collaborative processes were either by-passed by managements' unilateral decision-making, or the issue could not be resolved to the satisfaction of workers. In Financial Services case F, for instance, management decided to sell part of the business and failed to consult the union (or employees) prior to the announcement. Union representatives explained that such events would make it difficult to sell partnership to workers, as the shop steward in Finance firm F remarked:

> *"When decisions like that are made and you are not aware of them, the first thing that is going to be thrown at you by your members is 'Where is your partnership now'. It's very hard to explain"*

Robust or shallow 'institutionalization' of collaborative processes: Cooperation and collaboration were more likely to appear sustainable in cases where seemingly robust internal institutionalization of vertically aligned stakeholder governance models supported proactive worker and union contributions to company performance (e.g. encompassing information-sharing, financial stakeholding, employee participation, and training). In Manufacturing firm A, and Finance F, a range of structures facilitated collaborative mutuality vertically, from top to bottom. At Manufacturing A, for instance, unions and managers agreed a bundle of complementary mutual gains practices: semi-autonomous teamwork, regular informal management–union information-sharing and consultation, annualized hours, gainsharing, single status conditions, training, and an employment security clause. In Finance F, notwithstanding the situation referred to above when unions were not consulted about selling part of the business, there were regular opportunities to discuss company merger issues, with in-built confidentiality clauses to prevent information being leaked externally. Across these relatively robust cases informal dialogue featured prominently. For example, a series of issue-based teams were established in Manufacturing A to examine emergent business and employment issues, the most significant of which was known as a 'Business Performance Improvement' (BPI) team. The BPI team provided unions with input into strategic decision-making, particularly in formulating five-year business plans. Management also enhanced direct (rather than collective or representative) participation by introducing semi-autonomous teams that institutionalized considerable autonomy over work tasks at the point of production.

In contrast, internal institutionalization of collaboration at Manufacturing B and D and Hospitality E was shallow in terms of scale and scope, mostly restricted to formal bodies that gravitated around indirect management-union forums. This formalisation of structures was not sufficiently institutionalized at each company. For instance, there was considerably less scope for direct employee participation than there was at Manufacturing A. Cooperation eventually broke down in Manufacturing B and D due to a combination of external competitive pressures and shallow internal institutionalization.

Regarding strength of workplace institutions for management-worker collaboration across the case studies, the scope of issues tended to span low-level operational type issues, with some higher-level strategic business matters. Of particular importance is how formal structures differed across workplaces, which affected the ability of worker representatives to influence decisions. Some cases had clearer divisions than others between 'partnership forums' on the one hand, and 'union-management negotiating bodies' on the other. In Manufacturing C and Hospitality E, management dominated the agenda-setting to a greater extent than at the other firms. The implication in these two cases is a diminished role for worker representatives in enabling issues to be raised. Specific examples of the scope of issues discussed included new automation in Manufacturing A, C and D, and staffing levels and recruitment methods for team members in Manufacturing C. In Financial Services F, the partnership forum discussed employment security, with new arrangements giving temporary staff opportunities to attain permanent status. In Hospitality E, the partnership forum agreed new job-sharing arrangements. Significantly, running alongside partnership committees were other union-management mechanisms that would discuss more contentious issues, such as changes to pension schemes, pay, and discipline. Some firms had a specific policy of discussing such issues outside partnership, while others did not. For example, Manufacturing A and C frequently discussed gain-sharing plans in the forum, while similar pay and bonus-related issues were deemed ‘industrial relations’ matters at Manufacturing B and Financial Services F.

Significantly, robustness of collaborative mutuality was connected not only with formal structures but also the informal processes of dialogue between workplace representatives and managers. Informal social exchanges served as a conduit to information-exchange and consultation owing to a high level of informal dialogue outside formal mechanisms. This often meant management and unions would have prior warning of big issues, and informal dialogue helped to speed-up decision-making response. Informal dialogue was particularly pronounced at Manufacturing A, and a shop steward there remarked how informal dialogue was conducted:

> *“It wouldn’t be that I would be constantly going into an office discussing something for an hour with somebody. It would be kind of a general conversation over lunch or breakfast or something like that”.*

Management and union 'champions': Our case evidence illustrates that enduring workplace pacts require senior management and union 'champions' to drive and sustain collaborations from the very top on a long-term basis. However, an issue in many organizations today is that the most talented senior HR Directors, for example, often stay in posts for shorter periods than in the past – and collaboration often relies on continuity. At Manufacturing D, for example, the original cadre of senior managers responsible for cooperation all left, and some of the replacement managers were less inclined to maintain cooperation when confronted by competitive difficulties. Some also preferred unilateral management styles. This raises the issue that without succession planning voluntary workplace cooperation is vulnerable to collapse when senior management (or union) supporters leave. Mutuality subsequently collapsed at Manufacturing D when management were confronted by market pressures. In contrast, Manufacturing A has not faced a senior management (or union) succession dilemma – most senior supporters of cooperation remained, ensuring continuity in top management and union support. The importance of champions was raised in other cases. A manager at Manufacturing B commented:

> *"Really for the partnership to be successful you have to have the leadership and that has come from the very top. I would say if you took certain people out of the thing the partnership would fall apart".*

In Financial Services F, the senior operations manager similarly explained that multiple levels of management were active in partnership forums across the organisation:

"Partnership would have the very senior managers from the branch network and from [HQ]"

In summary, the evidence depicts the important interplay between multi-level macro and micro factors affecting durability of collaborative mutuality. While the extent and significance of some factors differ depending on each particular case, they are significant at one level or another. The overarching macro-level forces affecting collaborative mutuality included exposure to systemic global neo-liberal market forces, which meant that even in 'robust' cases workplace bargains were vulnerable to breach and ultimately, in three cases, to collapse. Other macro-level factors were the permissive voluntarist nature of employment regulation, which meant that choices about mutuality, in particular whether to engage in it or not, were dominated by management. Aligned with minimal regulatory constraints from State apparatuses, management tended to opt to consolidate their power position rather than share it with other workplace stakeholders. Micro-level factors influencing collaboration included: business strategies that sought to differentiate on either cost or quality; the use of advanced technology (continuous process technology, for example); a balancing of the risks and power distributions necessary for collaboration to function; union strength; and long-term presence of both senior management and union champions to promote workplace collaboration. However, micro-level factors were generally insufficient props against SSD effects.

Table I below summarizes the main features from the six cases in relation to robustness and durability.

TABLE I HERE

5. Discussion and Future Implications

Deploying the SSD effects framework, it can be shown that local actors engaging in collaborative workplace regimes confront a range of interacting forces: i) unstable globalized system effects of neo-liberal capitalist stages of accumulation; ii) societal effects promoting voluntary rather than complementary institutional constraints supporting workplace mutuality; and iii), effects arising from dominant economies and multinational corporations. Drawing on case evidence, this article has advanced three theoretical propositions to help explain why workplace mutuality will not typically endure in neo-liberal market environments. In such contexts, the tensions involved in seeking to balance efficiency, equity and voice outcomes will mean that voluntarist workplace partnerships seldom endure in the longer-term.

Proposition 1 develops the System effects element of the SSD framework (Smith and Meiksins, 1995; Edwards *et al.*, 2013), suggesting that as neo-liberal economies are particularly exposed to global market volatility and intensified financialization, there is high probability that employers will violate or exit from workplace bargains agreed with employees (Thompson, 2013). There were incidents across our cases of managerial breaches of explicit bargains with labour; for example in Manufacturing B, C and D, when partnership collapsed in the context of serious profit accumulation crises; or in Finance F, when management unilaterally transferred part of the business without consultation. To a large degree, local management themselves felt unable to support the depth of consultation necessary for sustained mutual collaboration, owing to external market forces against which they felt relatively powerless.

Proposition 2 advanced that the permissive nature of voluntarism, and resultant lack of institutional regulation to protect the balance of voice, will inhibit the conditions for collaborative mutuality to grow and sustain. The evidence suggests that a 'light-touch' (minimalist) regulatory regime facilitated excessive employer dominance of the partnership agenda. Consequently, workplace collaborative choices are often too dependent on the authority and sponsorship of senior management, lacking independent institutional power resources. In the absence of external institutional constraints, it is very difficult to balance the 'risks' and 'tensions' underpinning a voluntary equilibrium between management's search for efficiency and employee (union) concerns about equity and voice (Martinez-Lucio and Stuart, 2005).

Furthermore, evidence related to Proposition 2 is not exclusive to our cases or to the societal and institutional context of Ireland. Importantly, similar patterns can be observed in other neo-liberal comparative contexts. In the UK, Oxenbridge and Brown (2004: 401) concluded that managers and union representatives found that robust cooperative systems may be more effective than shallow arrangements, yet were at times difficult to sustain, even in economic sectors where trade unionism was deeply embedded. Butler *et al.,* (2011) assess cooperative relations when faced with conditions of recession and retrenchment in a UK engineering company. The dual factors of union power and (quality-orientated) competitive strategy shaped the extent of partnership and managements' willingness to extend decision-making with employees (unions). Similarly, Kochan *et al.,* (2008) report on the most comprehensive voluntary labour-management collaboration in North America, at Kaiser Permanente, which covers 86,000 employees represented by over thirty local and ten national union committees. They emphasize the precariousness of voluntarism as undermining cooperative mutuality, attributable especially to the liberalised US corporate governance system. They conclude that partnership is unlikely to proliferate ‘without strong buttressing elements from the external environment’ (2008:63). The dedication of enlightened management and union leaders in support of collaboration in specific organizations will, they argue, not be enough of itself to render mutual gains a more enduring phenomenon. This is especially so ‘if the labor movement remains as limited in scope and power as it is today, since the option of escaping from union status is available to so many employers’ (Kochan *et al.,* 2008:63).

Turning to Proposition 3, workplace practices for mutuality in our case organizations were shaped by Dominance effects emanating from the dominant economy of the United States and the power of multinational corporations to export more individualised HRM practices. All the case organizations (of whatever country origin) had introduced what were viewed as ‘best practice’ or ‘high-commitment’ type individualist HRM policies in their subsidiaries which, in some cases, undermined collectivist structures of employee voice and union bargaining. Significantly, dominance effects have been shown to permeate down into our case organizations due also to a distinctive unitarist managerial ideology among US-owned multinationals: an ideology that eschews collective pluralist mechanisms for collaboration such as statutory rights for trade union recognition or legislation ensuring representative-based works councils; the presence of which might have otherwise provided for more robust and enduring workplace mutuality.

The results suggest that organizations configure their workplace employment regimes, including HRM practices, in order to reflect their own organizational level contingencies. But work regimes are also strongly influenced, yet not determined, by the dynamic interaction of a blend of all three higher level SSD contextual forces; a finding also observed by other management scholars (Edwards *et al.*, 2013).

Overall, the evidence presented here lends weight to the argument that mutual collaboration between management and labour in the workplace now appears to be largely a chimera in a hostile climate of systemic financialized neo-liberal capitalism. Long-standing workplace partnerships of the kind hoped for by advocates seem increasingly to reside in the realm of fantasy. Revisiting Fox (1979), the endorsement of mutuality as part of a pluralist set of *values* (something that ought to be) is very different to believing that enduring cooperation is adequately *realizable* through existing policies or structures to leverage institutional reform (actual practice). State policy promoting workplace collaboration in liberal market regimes has focused on encouraging managers to voluntarily design their own practices. On closer inspection of such policies, collaboration has been found to be largely devoid of a 'balance' of equity, voice, power and wealth distributing features.

Implications: the future trajectory of workplace mutuality

With regard to the trajectory for collaborative management-labour partnerships in the future, it would appear that the State, employers and unions remain locked into a status quo that militates against sustainable mutuality. The labour market trajectories of the State in neo-liberal regimes like Ireland, the UK, Australia and USA, point towards the continuation of light touch regulation. At best, government agencies and employer bodies tend to view labour regulations and trade union bargaining as something to be begrudgingly tolerated, or worse, as institutional interferences to be aggressively resisted (Gall and Dundon, 2013). Regarding the trajectory for employers, the longevity of workplace cooperation is often conditional on it adding value to firms. While it cannot be discounted that some organizations can grow cooperative mutual gains, such instances are rare under conditions where employers have few constraints on their unitary authority, and the broader political economy often favours cost competition as the dominant business model. Put simply, many employers assume they do not need cooperative pluralist type arrangements to compete, or view the costs as too prohibitive (Godard, 2004; Dobbins and Gunnigle, 2009). If collaborative management-labour cooperation is revived as a productive policy goal, there would need to be a major cultural and ideological shift in the prevailing managerial mind-set so that the contested (pluralist) nature of employment relations is recognised and understood. Finally, for trade unions, there is an ongoing struggle to address declining density and organizational capacity, especially in the private sector. Union organizing may be seen as an alternative to partnership, but even this strategy acknowledges barriers given limited union resources and power (Simms *et al.*, 2012). Post global-economic crisis, it seems probable that unions will become increasingly dependent on employer sponsorship for recognition by offering greater concessions to management. Unlike Spanish or German unions who demonstrate comparative capacity to leverage work council regulations or mobilise through broader political coalitions (see Martinez-Lucio and Connolly, 2012), unions in Ireland (and the UK) appear to have side-stepped regulations that may have established some representative legitimacy through utilising or campaigning around more statutory employee information and consultation regulations (Dundon *et al*., 2014).

In terms of advancing alternatives to voluntarist mutuality, a possible (partial) response would require a European level review of the EU Information & Consultation of Employees (ICE) Directive to provide more robust legislation to compel parties to move to a more equitable power equilibrium. Indeed, this seems to be what the Directive originally envisaged, unlike the present arrangement, which seems to incentivise employers to construct minimal voice with little equity. In recent times, EU policy-makers have gravitated towards ‘softer’ (voluntaristic) social dialogue edicts and away from harder legislative constraints (Streeck, 2004). Problematically, for public policy, broader institutional pathways now appear firmly oriented towards neo-liberal regimes that explicitly prioritize economic efficiency of capital accumulation on behalf of big corporations, over-and-above concerns among other stakeholders for social equity and voice objectives. In explaining the 'strange non-death of neoliberalism', Crouch (2011) suggests that the dominance effects of giant corporations have intensified, rather than abated, after the 2008 financial crisis.

In conclusion, the prognosis for sustainable management-labour collaboration does not look positive, especially viewed against the fall-out from the international financial and economic crisis. The State and employers are increasingly offloading the burden of risk arising from capitalism onto employees - evidenced for example by more precarious employment conditions for many workers - which is not conducive to long-term mutuality (beyond a small elite of core workers). This article shows that workplace mutuality is likely to be constrained and relatively short-lived owing to the interaction of System, Society and Dominance effects in liberal market economies. In terms of future management research, we would encourage further comparative qualitative methodological analysis of the systemic structural causes of workplace and institutional change using the SSD framework, and assessment of the implications for different actors regarding the balance between efficiency, equity and voice.

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Table 1 – Robustness and durability of collaborative mutuality

Company	Size	Union Density	Robust-Shallow Durability	Durability related features
Manufacturing A	555	70% (100% of industrial workforce)	Robust, Enduring	High ‘institutionalization’ of collaboration; informal dialogue; relative insulation from market pressures; collaborative ‘champions’; capital intensive continuous process plant.
Manufacturing B	1600	100%	Collapsed 2005 Reconstituted 2008	Power and risk dis-equilibrium; conflicts of interest; insufficient institutionalization. Management dominated agenda.
Manufacturing C	85	100%	Collapsed	Management dominated agenda. Exposed to competitive pressures, profit crisis.
Manufacturing D	500	95%	Collapsed	High exposure to market forces; not deeply institutionalized; ‘champions’ left.
Hospitality E	480	75%	Shallow	Management dominated agenda. Collaboration not deeply institutionalized.
Finance F	600	94%	Partially Robust	Unilateral transfer of undertakings process (union excluded). Breach of trust.